

***'Our Man in Saigon***

The recall of the CIA chieftain in South Vietnam should not be an occasion for recrimination. It should be an occasion for some useful reconsideration of the general role of an intelligence agency in foreign affairs. Ambassador Lodge is reportedly concerned about the prevailing arrangement that makes the CIA both an intelligence-gathering organization and an operational agency in the field. Mr. Lodge is not alone in his concern.

In theory, within the CIA, the intelligence and operational activities are kept separate. In practice, the two functions cannot be kept apart so easily; experience has shown that agency operatives in the field have a tendency to use intelligence to support an operational decision. The result, too often, is that Washington receives neither impartial intelligence nor benefits from operations based on a hard-headed perception of reality.

Clearly the CIA is at a disadvantage in any public debate of its activities; the agency cannot speak for itself. Success often goes unnoticed; failure just as often may lead to an exaggeration of the CIA's responsibility. This is the price that secrecy exacts. But public concern in the agency's performance is legitimate and should not be equated with an attempt to smear or to impeach the motives of any CIA official.

What is sorely needed is a thorough and fair over-all study of the intelligence community. Such an inquiry ought to deal with rivalry between the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency. It ought to draw on experience in other countries where intelligence and operational activities are lodged with separate organizational entities. And Congress should take the initiative in launching such a study.

For too many years, members of Congress have closed their eyes to the need for legislative scrutiny into intelligence operations. Yet who else can do the job? The public lacks the facts; the Administration has a record to defend; the agency cannot be expected to study itself. Enough has come to light to justify an impartial inquiry, which might properly be conducted by a special legislative commission drawing on members of both chambers and upon private citizens of stature and experience.

If an investigation should discover no grounds for changing the present arrangement, public apprehension would be lessened. If an investigation should disclose need for basic changes, then the country might be saved from future embarrassment. In either case, the United States would be the gainer and Congress would have discharged a duty that it has been far too reluctant to perform.

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